

Message Text

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ACTION EA-12

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FM AMEMBASSY PORT MORESBY
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3299
INFO AMEMBASSY CANBERRA
CINCPAC HONOLULU

C O N F I D E N T I A L PORT MORESBY 0780

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV, PINT, PP
SUBJECT: OKUK CONFIRMED AS LEADER OF OPPOSITION

REF: PORT MORESBY 411

1. SUMMARY: WITHSTANDING A CHALLENGE FROM THE UNITED PARTY'S TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP, IAMBAKEY OKUK WAS RECONFIRMED AS LEADER OF THE PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION ON MAY 23 IN A 20-17 VOTE. OKUK'S COALITION WAS SUPPORTED PRIMARILY BY FORMER UNITED PARTY PEOPLE AND PAPUA BESENA. THE VOTE WAS A BLOW TO THE BADLY SPLIT UNITED PARTY AND TO THE GOVERNMENT WHICH PREFERRED TO HAVE THE OPPOSITION LEADERSHIP REMAIN WITH THE LESS AGGRESSIVE, MORE COMPLIANT UNITED PARTY. DESPITE LONG-STANDING POLICIES OF LEADER JOSEPHINE ABAIJAH, PAPUA BESENA MPS VOTED TO JOIN OPPOSITION COALITION AND BESENA'S PARLIAMENTARY LEADER ACCEPTED A SHADOW MINISTRY. END SUMMARY.

2. IAMBAKEY OKUK WAS RECONFIRMED AS LEADER OF THE PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION ON MAY 23 BY A 20-17 VOTE. SIR TEI ABAL, FORMERLY OPPOSITION LEADER AND HEAD OF UNITED
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PARTY (UP), HAD CHALLENGED OKUK'S RIGHT TO LEAD THE OPPOSITION, CLAIMING THAT RAPHAEL DOA, RECENTLY NAMED PARLIAMENTARY HEAD OF UP, LED THE LARGEST OPPOSITION GROUP IN PARLIAMENT. AN OKUK VS. DOA VOTE CAME OUT 16-16. THE SPEAKER THEN SUSPENDED THE SESSION FOR ELEVEN MINUTES. FOLLOWING FRENZIED LOBBYING, OKUK TURNED UP 20 VOTES TO DOA'S 17.

3. OKUK'S PEOPLES UNITED FRONT (PUF), A COALITION OF ANTI-GOVERNMENT MEMBERS COMMITTED TO OVERTHROW THE PANGU-PPP GOVERNING COALITION, WAS SUPPORTED BY PAPUA BESENA, A FEW INDEPENDENTS, EIGHT UP MEMBERS AND FOUR PANGU MPS, INCLUDING FELLOW CHIMBUS WHO ARE BELIEVED TO HAVE GONE ALONG ON TRIBAL, RATHER THAN PARTY GROUNDS. DOA'S SUPPORT WAS ALMOST ENTIRELY UP, WITH THREE GOVERNMENT SUPPORTERS JOINING IN.

4. THE VOTE WAS A BLOW TO BOTH THE UP AND THE GOVERNMENT. DOA IS A VERY CAPABLE, INDUSTRIOUS AND RESPECTED MP. HAD HE REPLACED SIR TEI PRIOR TO OKUK'S MOVE AT THE MARCH SESSION, HE PROBABLY COULD HAVE RETAINED THE OPPOSITION LEADERSHIP FOR UP WHICH IS NOW BADLY SPLIT. THE GOVERNMENT ATTEMPTED TO SUPPORT DOA AS WELL, PREFERRING TO HAVE THE MORE CONSERVATIVE, MORE COMPLIANT UP IN ITS TRADITIONAL OPPOSITION ROLE. UP ANNOUNCED AFTER THE MAY 23 VOTE THAT IT WOULD JOIN NEITHER THE GOVERNMENT NOR THE OPPOSITION, PREFERRING, IT SAID, TO ACT INDEPENDENTLY AND SUPPORT ISSUES ON THEIR MERITS.

5. A BASIC CHANGE IN PAPUA BESENA (PB) TACTICS ALSO IS EMERGING. PB LEADER JOSEPHINE ABAlAH, ON A YEAR'S LEAVE OF ABSENCE FROM PARLIAMENT, CONSISTENTLY OPPOSED COALITIONS WITH OTHER GROUPS, PREFERRING TO RETAIN CONFIDENTIAL

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BESENA'S PURITY AS A PRO-PAPUA MOVEMENT. HOWEVER, IN HER ABSENCE ALL PB PARLIAMENTARIANS VOTED TO SUPPORT OKUK AND TO JOIN THE PUF COALITION. PAPUA BESENA'S PARLIAMENTARY LEADER, JAMES MOPIO, ACCEPTED THE PUF SHADOW MINISTRY FOR DECENTRALIZATION AND PROVINCIAL AFFAIRS. ON HER RETURN JOSEPHINE ABAlAH WILL FACE A NUMBER OF OTHER BASIC DIFFERENCES WITH HER COLLEAGUES, INCLUDING PB'S FUTURE, WHETHER AS A POLITICAL PARTY OR A MOVEMENT AND WHETHER AS A MODERATE SEPARATIST MOVEMENT OR A PARTY LOBBYING FOR A BETTER DEAL FOR PAPUA WITHIN THE SYSTEM.

6. AS PER REFTTEL, SIR JOHN GUISE WAS NAMED DEPUTY LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION, ADDING A SKILLED PARLIAMENTARIAN AND CONTROVERSIAL ELDER POLITICIAN TO THE PUF FRONT BENCH. OLMSTED

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